

SCHOOL-ENTRY SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND LATER LITERACY AND MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT

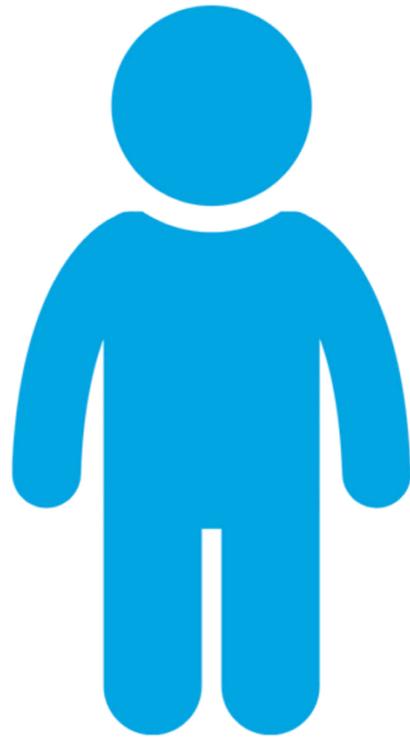
Evidence from South Africa

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DBE mental health
webinar
13 August 2025

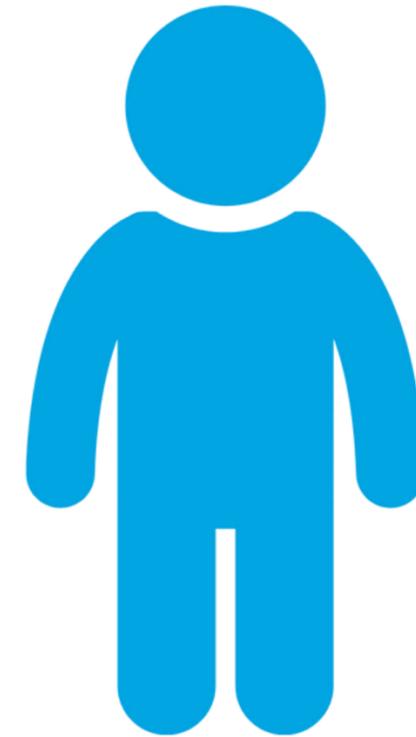


SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Comparing two learners with **the same...**



Age
Gender
Socio-economic status
School-entry cognitive skills
School



...the one with **better socio-emotional skills** at the start of grade R will **perform better** in literacy and maths in grade 2

MY DEFINITION:

ELOM 4&5 Social and Emotional Functioning Scale:

Social relations with peers and adults

The child plays co-operatively;
is able to form relationships and
interact appropriately with adults.

From Child Trends Teacher Rating and
California Desired Results
Developmental Profile

Emotional readiness for school

The child has age appropriate
emotional resources to manage
formal learning environments.

From South African Child
Assessment Scale (SACAS),
based on the Achenbach
scale.



INTRODUCTION

Why do socio-emotional skills matter for school success?

Form **stronger relationships with teachers**¹, in turn receive **more support and encouragement** (higher teacher investment).



Form more supportive relationships with their **school peers**.²

Are better able to **avoid distractions** and **persist in hard tasks**³.

1 Birch and Ladd, 1998
2 Wang et al., 2019
3 Sorrenti et al., 2019

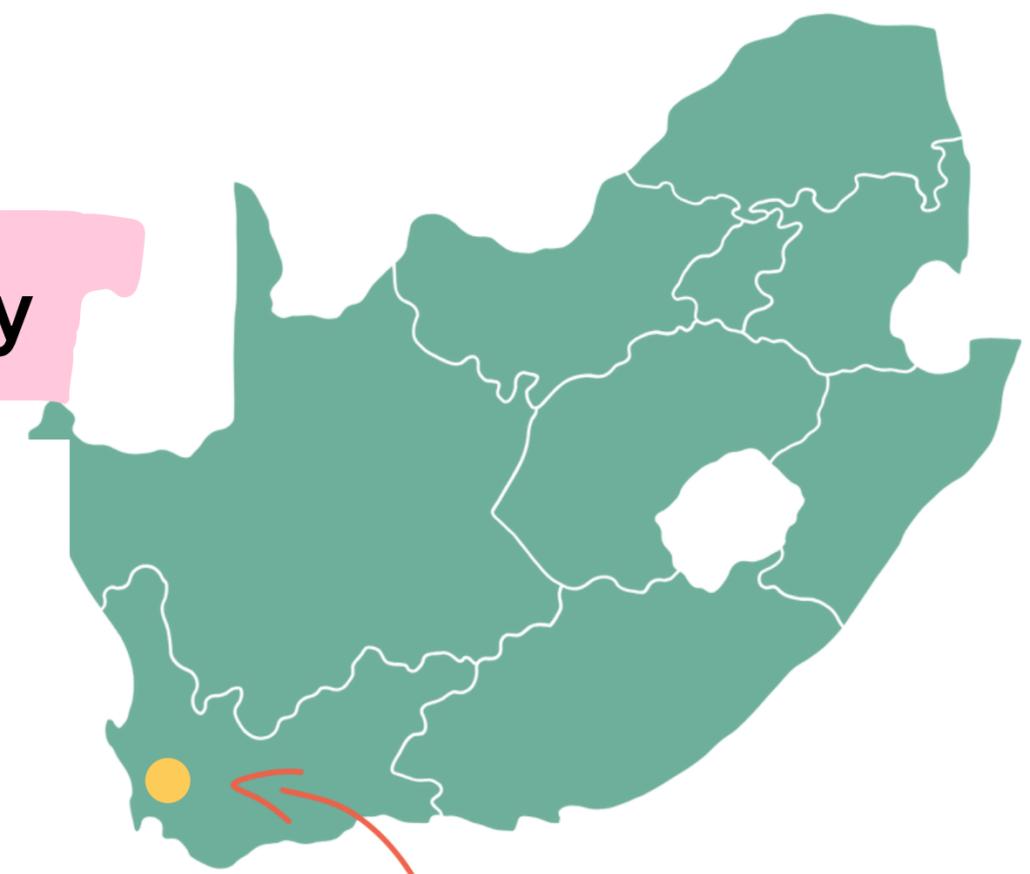
RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the relationship between school-entry socio-emotional skills and later academic achievement?



SAMPLE

Roots and Shoots study



Wave 1
Grade R



2022
ELOM
4&5



Wave 2
Grade 1



2023
ELOM
6&7



Wave 3
Grade 2



2024
Literacy &
maths



71%
no fee schools

51%
grant receipts

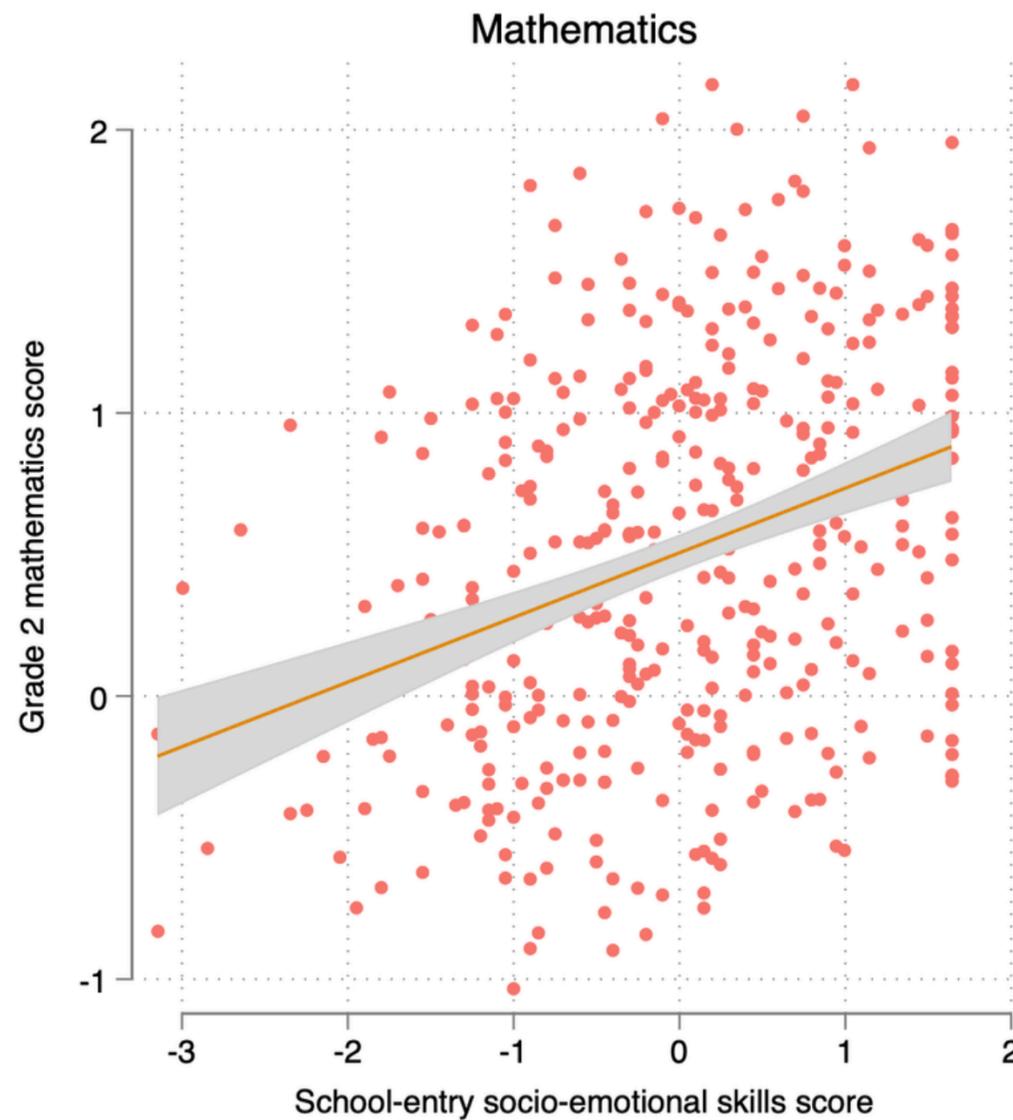
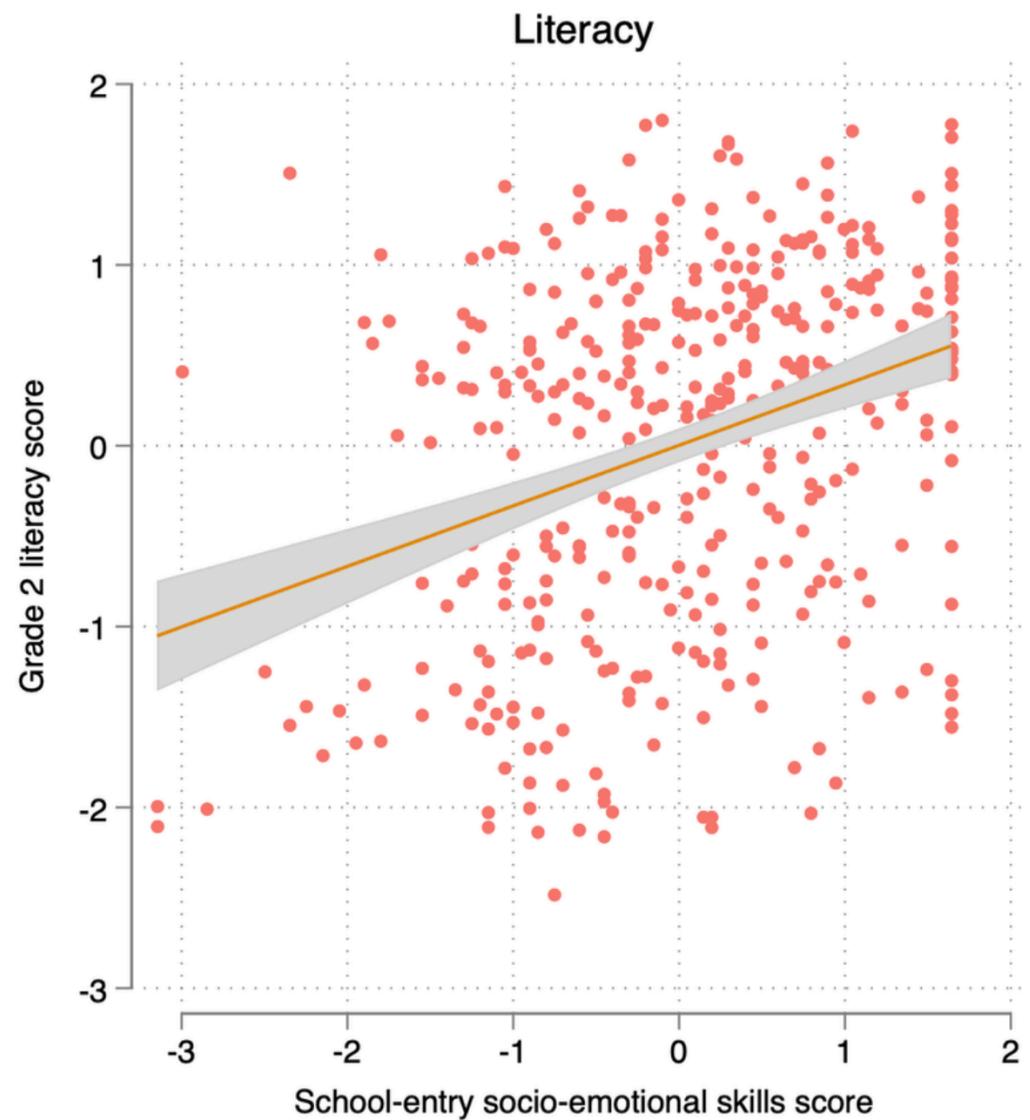
33%
isiXhosa

67%
Afrikaans

5.5
years old

49%
male

FINDINGS



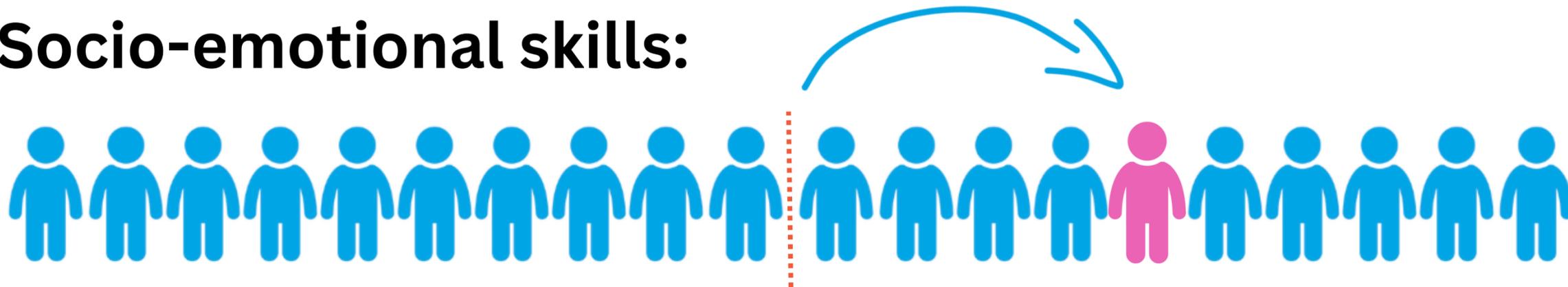
- Fitted values
- 95% confidence interval
- Fitted line

A strong positive association between socio-emotional skills and grade 2 achievement in literacy and maths.

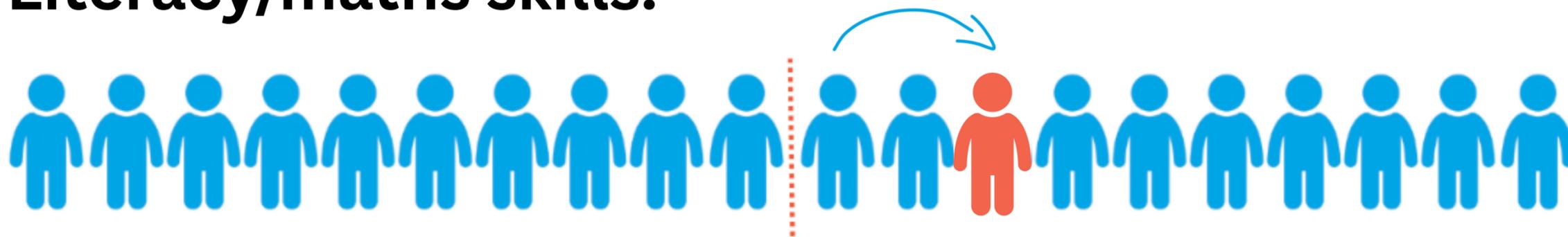
FINDINGS

Effect sizes

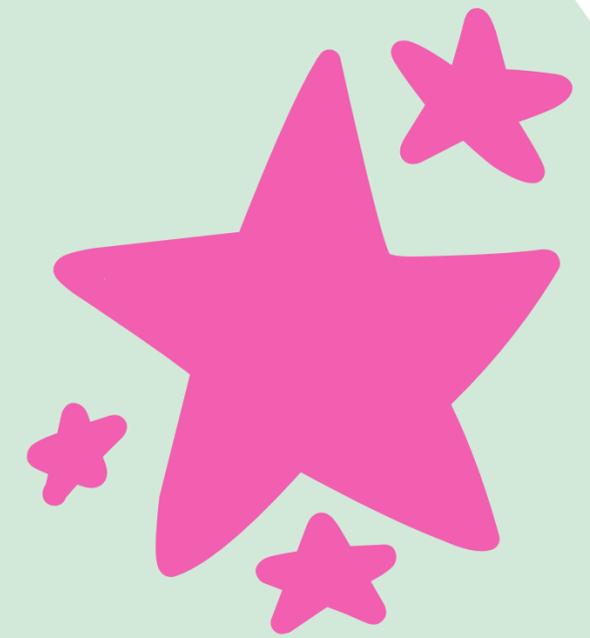
Socio-emotional skills:



Literacy/maths skills:



FINDINGS



There is a **stronger** association for:



Boys



Children in **fee-paying schools**



Children from **wealthier households**



Children with **higher cognitive skills** at the start of school

FINDINGS

The strong positive association between socio-emotional skills and grade 2 achievement holds even when **controlling** for:



Age and gender



Socio-economic status

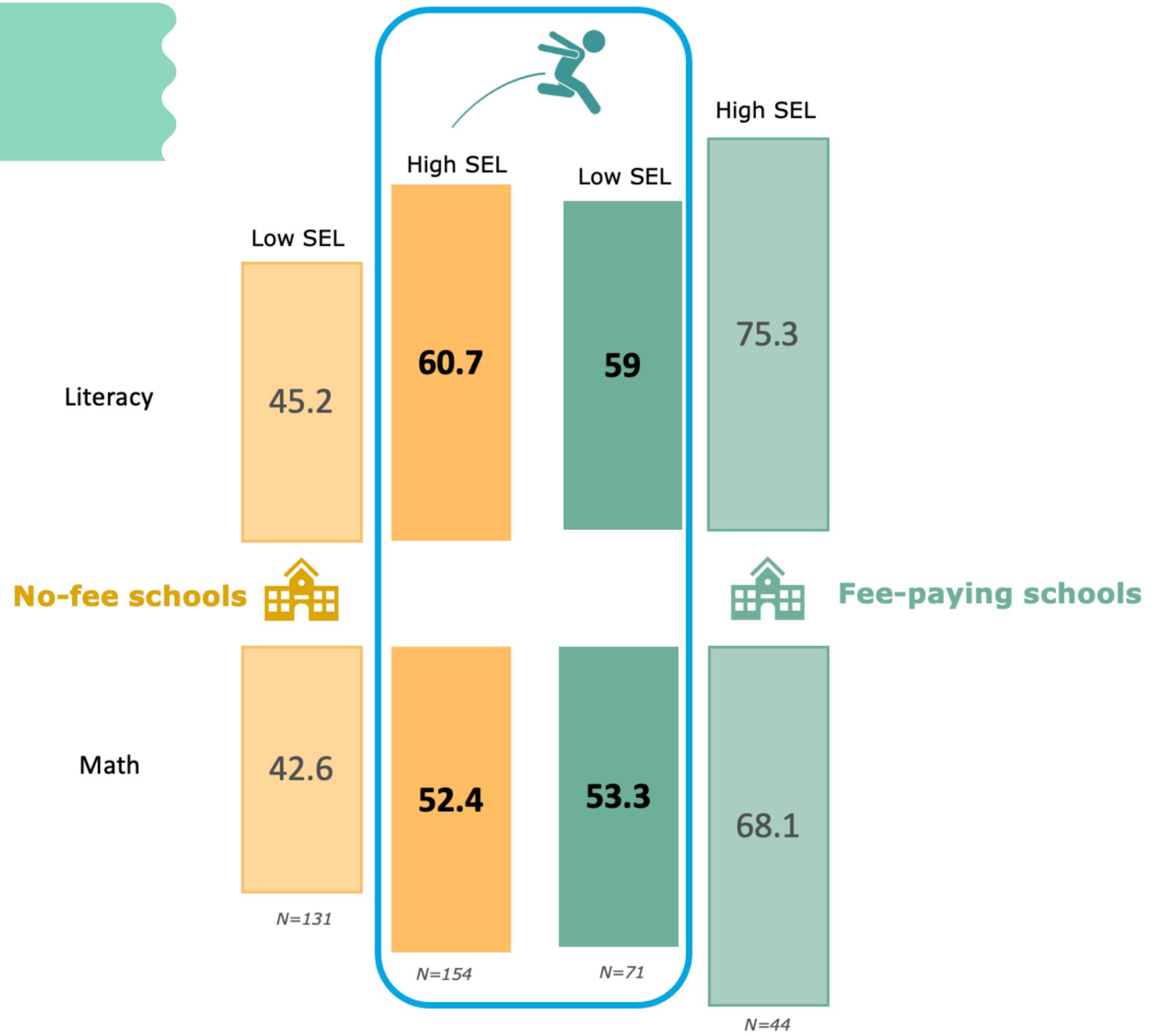


School-entry cognitive skills



School effects

FINDINGS



WHAT'S NEW?

- South African **longitudinal** evidence
- Control for **cognitive skills**

IMPLICATIONS

- Socio-emotional skills **aren't just an optional “add-on”**: they are the foundational skills that support learning
- SEL could be the **great equaliser**—if done right





THANK YOU

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